

## Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz: the Formidable 17th Century Feminist You've Never Heard Of

By Christine Santisteban

Sor **Juana Inés de la Cruz**, O.S.H. (November 12, 1651 – April 17, 1695), was a Mexican nun of the order of Saint Jerome (Hieronymite). She was a notorious self-taught scholar, mystic, philosopher and poet of the Baroque school of New Spain, known in her lifetime as "The Tenth Muse", or "The Phoenix of America." The title also suggestive that she may have been a lesbian. Juana learned to read at age 3. By age 8 she was studying Latin and pursuing interests in every field of knowledge. Her writings caught the attention of the Viceroy of Mexico, the Marqués de Mancera who convoked (possibly at the instigation of others with less admiration for a young girl of intellect) some forty learned men - theologians, philosophers, mathematicians, historians, poets, humanists, among others to examine the child who so astounded the court with her erudition and her poetry. Juana was 16 years old. Mancera himself said "in the manner that a royal galleon might fend off attacks of small canoes, so did Juana extricate herself from the questions, arguments, and objections these many men, each in his specialty, directed to her."

A prolific writer of courtly plays, personal essays, scholarly research, and religious treatises, Her bold confrontation with church authority set her apart as a folklore heroine and staunch feminist. In 1690 she had the audacity to set down in writing a critical attack on a sermon delivered 40 years earlier by Antonio de Vieyra SJ, a famed Portuguese Jesuit, entitled "Sermon on the Mandate" This critique eventually came to the Bishop of Puebla, Don Manuel Fernández de Santa Cruz y Sahagún. He wrote 'Carta Atenagórica' or Letter Worthy of Athena and signed it with the pseudonym Sor Filotea (Lover of God) castigating her actions and suggested that she dedicate herself to more suitable pursuits. Holding her own, Sor Juana subsequently wrote La Respuesta a Sor Filotea (Response to Sister Filotea), one of her most famous writings and the most autobiographical.

In defending her right to knowledge, Sor Juana responded with stunning self-defense. She defended the right of all women to attain knowledge and famously wrote (echoing a poet and Saint Teresa of Avila), "***One can perfectly well philosophize while cooking supper,***" justifying her study of secular topics as necessary to understanding theology. "***Who has forbidden women to engage in private and individual studies? Have they not a rational soul as men do?...I have this inclination to study and if it is evil I am not the one who formed me thus - I was born with it and with it I shall die.***"

Sor Juana died in Mexico City, Mexico, on April 17, 1695 while nursing her sister nuns during a virulent epidemic. Today, Sor Juana stands as a national icon of Mexican identity, and her image appears on Mexican currency. She came to new prominence in the late 20th century with the rise of feminism and women's writing, officially becoming credited as the first published feminist of the New World.

